

Communication Corner

Agitation in Older Persons with Dementia

An estimated four million older Americans are currently diagnosed with dementia (National Institute on Aging, 1999). The term *dementia* refers to a severed loss of thinking abilities, especially memory. It occurs most often in later years. Some memory loss is normal as we age, but dementia is not. Dementia is always caused by an underlying disease that damages brain tissue, leading to disturbed brain functioning.

Many people with dementia experience emotional distress or behavioral changes best summed up by the term *agitation*. Very mild agitation may seem like a personality change in a person.

Four problems* that can cause agitation are physical and medical problems, environmental stresses, sleep problems, and psychiatric syndromes. In all these situations, a person with dementia is more easily agitated because the brain has physically changed and no longer functions in a healthy manner.

If a person with dementia has recently become agitated for the first time or has a change from his or her usual behavior, one thing to look for is a medical or physical problem.

Sudden illnesses may weaken the brain, causing worsened agitation. The most common medical problems that can cause agitation are bladder infections, bad colds, bronchitis or pneumonia,

pain, and dehydration or poor nutrition. It is also very important to make sure the someone who has become more agitated has not recently had a stroke or been injured in a fall. Finally, flare-ups of chronic diseases, such as diabetes or diseases of the heart, liver or kidneys can cause agitation, especially if a person with dementia does not take medications consistently or fails to follow a special diet.

A toxic reaction to medication is an important cause of sudden confusion and agitation. Older persons often take many different medications that can interact with each other. It is crucial to find out if side effects of a new prescription, interactions between medications, or taking the wrong dose have led to a bad reaction.

Common physical problems that cause pain, discomfort, worry, or lack of sleep can lead to agitation by making the person upset or fatigued. Examples of such problems include arthritis, sitting all day in an uncomfortable position, constipation, and impaired vision or hearing.

*Physical and medical problems will be discussed in this issue; please see upcoming issues for discussion of the other causes.

References

National Institute on Aging. 1999. *Progress report on Alzheimer's disease*. Silver Spring, MD: NIA.

<http://www.psychguides.com/gahe.html>

The Communication Corner addresses information on dementia and dementia-related diseases. Please address comments to ythom1@co.fairfax.va.us